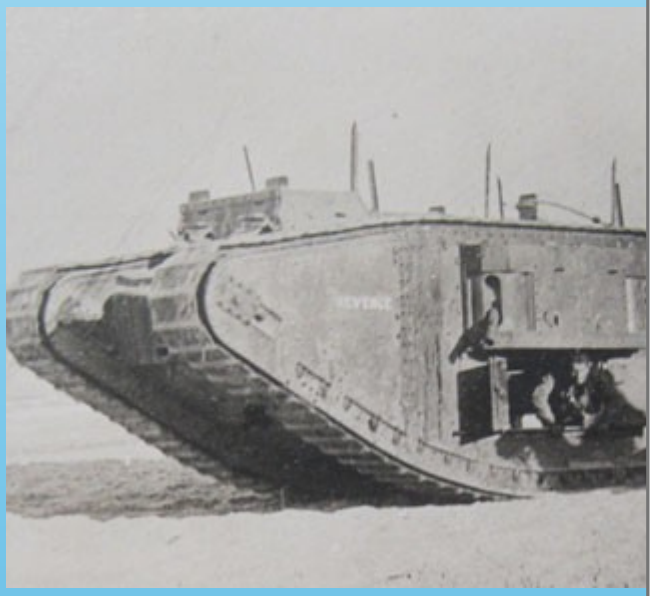


The Mark series of tanks created in World War One did reach the Middle East and were used in Palestine. It was here that the tank could have made an extraordinary difference, but it was not allowed to because of misuse and mistrust.

Near East Observers

The Tank in Palestine

James Bowden

Introduction

Most people are not aware that the tank did make an early appearance in the Middle East and that this appearance began as early as the Palestine Campaign in World War One. It came into the region under the leadership of A.P. Wavell and Archibald Murray, who brought the British Expeditionary Force into Palestine via the Sinai Peninsula. However, the leadership of the time was deeply suspicious of the tank and still in the enthrall of the cavalry. This influenced not only the use of the tank but also the impression of it, and thus the course of the campaign. Improperly handled and deeply resented, the tank did not have much of a chance to make an impression. But it was a beginning, a fresh mark on the history of the region.

The Mark IV tank was one of the first designs of tanks made by the British. The prior versions being those that were created and developed on training and proving grounds of England and then deployed in the near fully developed Mark IV. The Mark IV appeared in the Palestine Campaign in 1917, shipped by the government in order to tip the balance of power in the favor of the British, however, its most ardent defenders and those who knew how to use it most were left behind in Europe on the cold, damp battlefields and thus the tank was sent into combat without the people who knew it best.

Tank Design and Technical Specifications

There is a little misunderstanding in the name ‘tank’. The initial concept and drawings were labelled as “The landship”. The landship was designed initially to overcome the extensive series of narrow trenches on the European battlefield. The idea had been that there needed to a bulldozer of sorts that could penetrate the razor wire and then overcome the trenches by bridging them with its body. This idea led to the design of the lozenge shape, forward leaning elements and the extended body. This configuration would allow the machine to reach the opposite of the trench where the treads enabled the tank to climb out and then to have a stable crossing. Some French designs added additional wheels because the trenches were too wide or the tank, landship too short to cross without falling backwards into the trench. ‘Tank’ as has been widely noted, came from the code name for the vehicle as the English became aware that there were spies in England as well as attempts at similar designs in France and

it was felt that a name such as tank, would carefully disguise the intent. The landship tank was very successful in the European theater but it faced significant challenges in Palestine, mostly from the British leadership and the land.

In specific terms, the tanks featured approximately the same technical specifications, they featured a Daimler / Knight straight 6, 10hp motor. The tanks usually weighed about 31.4 tons, with 12mm thick armor. They also featured five Lewis machine guns, likely ports, and two-six pounder QF guns. It had a crew of 8 and these were placed in various positions, discussed below. The tank was not initially designed to be “heavy” or “light”. It was built to withstand the punishing blows of machine gun fire and mortar rounds. The tank was so new that no anti-tank weapon had been designed to that point. The tank was slow, it was only able to manage about ten miles per hour, about the speed of walking infantry who the tank was designed to support after breaking through the barbed wire.

The readers who may be familiar with the movie “*Indian Jones and the Last Crusade*” will remember the tank featured in one of the more exciting moments in the movie. The tank used was given additional speed, no tank until the German Panzers and the M3A1 Stuart Light Tank managed to reach those speeds. The Mark series and no other tanks from the period featured the turret as featured in the movie. Variants might have had a traversable turret but it would have been post-World War I. The movie did properly portray the inner space of the tank. It was a single large, multi-

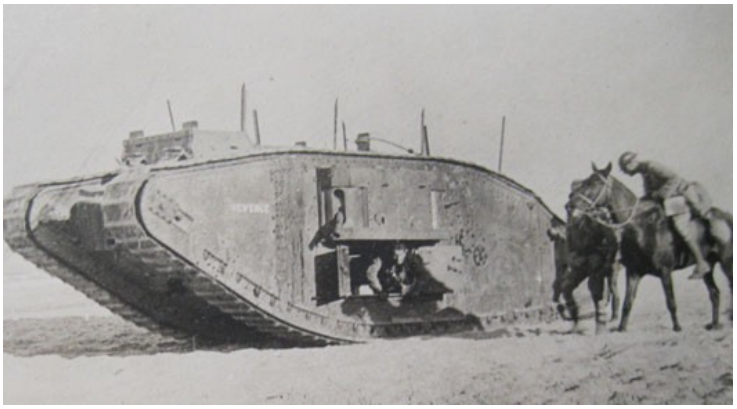
crew compartment. It was hot and noisy, due to the fact that the engine was not separated from the crew compartment. The interior was heated from the engine and it was noisy. The noise of the tracks, the engine, and the noise of the parts all combined to make the compartment a hot and uncomfortable experience. This also made the wireless telegraph machines also hard to operate as it was difficult to hear the incoming signals. These conditions, brutal to begin with in Europe, were exacerbated in the hot, humid climate of Palestine. There was a driver, two gunners from the side guns, and a wireless operator. There would also be a commander to sit with the men and direct, the total crew was 8 men. The tanks were initially designed as either ‘male’ or ‘female’. The male tanks were designated as such when they had guns on either side of the tank which protruded. The female tanks featured only gunports for machine guns.

The Tank in the Middle East

The Mark IV was used at the 1st and 2nd Battles of Gaza. It did not help the tank that the leadership of the campaign at the time was still in the thrall of cavalry and had not embraced the landship. Indeed, in the official record of the campaign *A Brief Record of the Advance of the Egyptian*

Expeditionary Force, within a book of nearly 300-pages the only mention of the tank is on a single line, “Six tanks participated in the later parts of the attack, rendering material assistance”. With the lack of desire to use it in the first place, the landship was not generally well used and it was used poorly, resulting in bad results. This tautology resulted in the tank being abandoned in favor of cavalry.

The tank was unable to handle the soft loam sand that covered the areas to the west, south, and east of Gaza City. The tanks could not move and became stalled, unable to move up the sand hills that circled the city and were a part of the geography of the beaches. This resulted in a situation in which they were left vulnerable to the pounding of the artillery which surrounded Gaza.



Many pictures of the tanks in Gaza feature the extensive damage done to them, shot through with holes made by artillery. But this likely does not convey the full story and it is unfortunate that the tank would not be deployed for the southern portion of the campaign.

Despite the lack of use of tanks in this war in this theater and the lack of proper use and belief, the tank would return to the Middle East and would prove itself invaluable to military operations from World War Two and beyond.